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National Intelligence Bulletin

Top Secret

16 December 1974

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Nº 654

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National Intelligence Bulletin

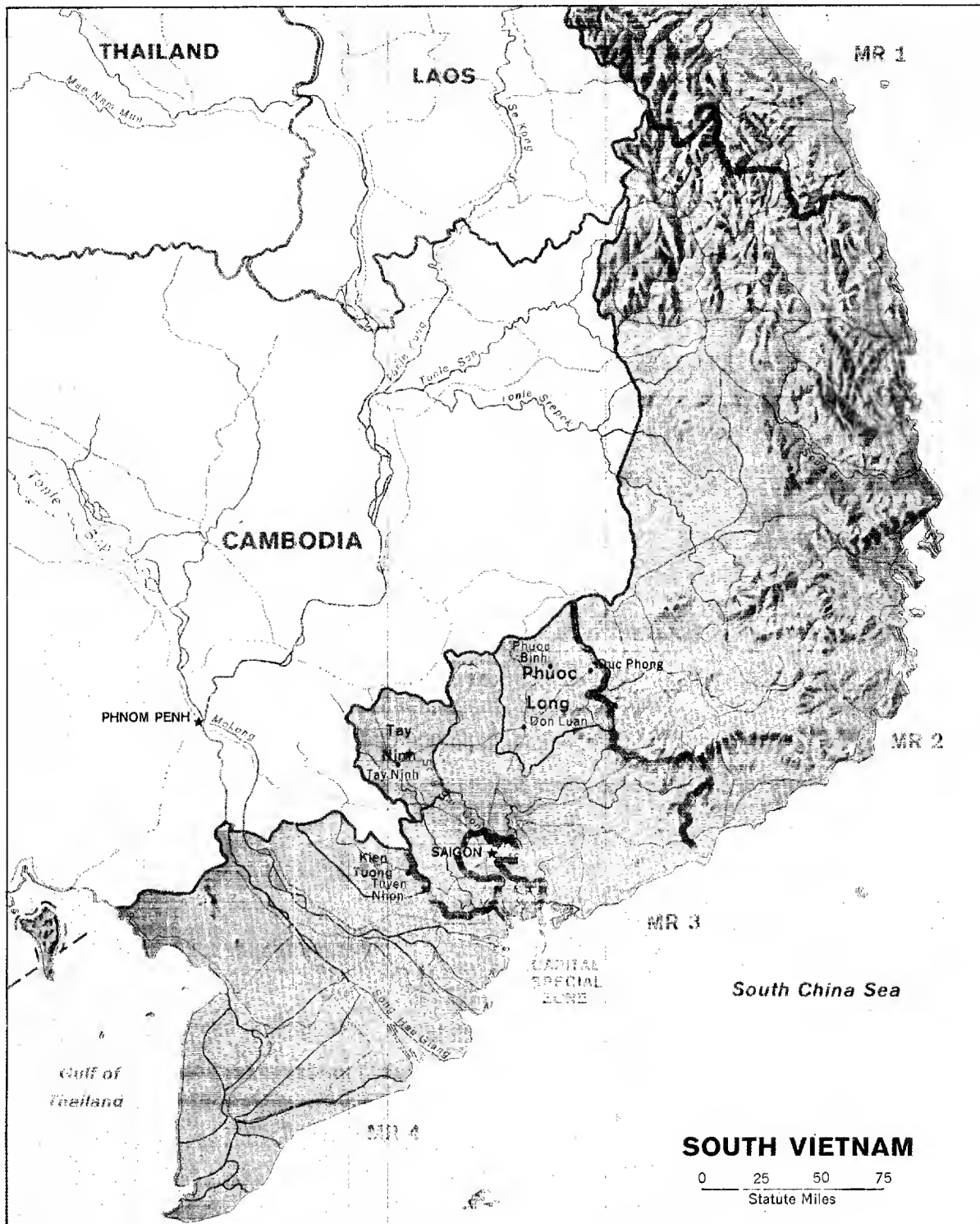
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SOUTH VIETNAM

Communist forces overran a district town north of Saigon this weekend and are maintaining heavy pressure against several other government positions and population centers in the southern half of the country.

Duc Phong, a district town in Phuoc Long Province, fell on December 15 after nearly five hours of heavy Communist shelling. Local militia defending the town withdrew in orderly fashion; casualty figures are not yet available. Communist forces in the area--believed to include a North Vietnamese regiment--also overran a government military encampment farther south and are pressuring the adjoining district capital at Don Luan. Rockets and artillery have been fired into the provincial capital at Phuoc Binh.

Heavy fighting continues in Tay Ninh Province where South Vietnamese units are having trouble trying to reinforce local militia units at two locations on the outskirts of the provincial capital. The government's commander for Military Region 3, General Nam, reportedly is reluctant to commit his main combat units to back up the territorials,

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In the delta, action has diminished in Kien Tuong Province after six days of heavy fighting, but renewed Communist assaults are expected soon. Units from the North Vietnamese 5th Division infiltrating the area now have almost complete control of Tuyen Nhon district.

Military activity elsewhere in the country is light,

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Heavy rains in Military Region I have kept the pace of the action slow in the country's northern command.

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EGYPT

Cairo media have avoided comment on a key point in Foreign Minister Fahmi's enumeration on Friday of Egypt's tougher negotiating conditions--the demand that Israel either agree to the formation of a single Jewish-Muslim-Christian state or return to the UN partition plan of 1947. Media commentators have made much, however, of the demand that Israel cease immigration for 50 years.

Cairo could be having second thoughts about its bold attempt to redefine Israel's pre-1967 borders. The emphasis on the immigration issue could in itself upset negotiations and, at a minimum, will revive Israeli doubts about Egyptian willingness eventually to coexist with Israel.

The media, usually quick to take up any theme enunciated by government officials, were initially silent. Cairo radio waited almost 24 hours; the press did not comment until yesterday. The delay suggests that Fahmi's announcement caused some consternation and that the media obtained official guidance before venturing to editorialize.

Explaining Fahmi's demand for an end to immigration, a Cairo radio commentator said that it was not made "out of blatant arrogance" but only to "diagnose" the source of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The commentator equated Israel's "expansionist policy" with its encouragement of immigration. He claimed that expansionism is the deliberate aim of Israeli leaders and the natural outcome of immigration, which cannot be sustained except by extending Israel's present area.

Cairo newspapers have touched on an Egyptian concern arising from Prime Minister Rabin's recent statement of Israel's negotiating strategy. The papers assert that Egypt will not be a party to Rabin's strategy because it operates on the assumption that Israel can remove Egypt from the conflict via a separate agreement and then more easily "impose" its conditions on the other Arab states.

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The press commentary and Cairo radio's denunciation of Israeli immigration may signal Egypt's attempt to reassert its guardianship over the Arab cause by joining forces with the other Arabs and in effect backing off from its more independent stance.

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Sadat has until now appeared to be willing to proceed with a second-stage withdrawal in the Sinai Peninsula, despite the brickbats of other Arabs, particularly Syria, in order to ease domestic military pressures and to justify his reliance on US mediation. Israeli leaders have hinted broadly during the past week that such a withdrawal would be the last for several years.

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Sadat may have concluded that he could not sustain another Egyptian-Israeli agreement on the Sinai if there were not hope for quick follow-up movement at least on the Syrian front.

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RHODESIA

Prime Minister Smith has taken the first step toward implementing his truce agreement with Rhodesian insurgents by allowing two long-imprisoned rebel leaders to resume political activity in Rhodesia.

Late last week, Joshua Nkomo and Ndabaningi Sithole, leaders of the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union and the Zimbabwe African National Union, respectively, made a joint public appearance and statement in Salisbury after returning from Lusaka, Zambia, where they had gone to formulate a common bargaining position with exiled Rhodesian insurgents and to negotiate the truce with Smith's envoys. The appearance of the two leaders, their first in a decade, followed Smith's announcement that, in return for a cease-fire agreement, he was releasing all the black nationalists who have been under detention in Rhodesia. Nkomo and Sithole were joined in their appearance by Bishop Muzorewa, head of the noninsurgent African National Council, the only nationalist group Smith has allowed to function openly in Rhodesia.

Rhodesia's exiled nationalist leaders, who have been directing guerrilla operations inside Rhodesia from bases in Zambia, may not be willing to honor an immediate cease-fire as implied in Smith's announcement of the truce. These leaders, who also participated in the Lusaka talks, have not been heard from since the talks.

The exiled nationalists may be awaiting assurance that Smith's promise of amnesty applies to them along with the nationalists who have been under detention in Rhodesia, or they may be waiting for Smith to make further concessions.

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